

A Common Word

“More positive and open, yet mainstream and orthodox”

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Introduction

A Common Word Between Us and You has become one of the most successful Muslim initiatives toward Christians in the post-9/11 era. The document was written by Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad of Jordan in consultation with several leading Muslim religious authorities, signed by 138 Muslim religious leaders and scholars from around the world, and issued by the Jordanian Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute on October 13, 2007. Many more Muslim religious scholars and leaders beyond the original 138 have signed *A Common Word* since it was issued.¹

A good number of Christians have warmly welcomed *A Common Word*, often taking the opportunity to offer clarifications of Christian doctrine. One of the most prominent responses was the Yale Divinity School statement, *Loving God and Neighbor Together*, published in the

New York Times on November 11, 2007. This was signed by over 300 Christian leaders, mainly Americans.² Many church bodies have also issued official responses to *A Common Word*. The replies of Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams³ and the Baptist World Alliance⁴ were among the most extensive and theological. Despite these appreciative replies to *A Common Word*, the document has not been uncontroversial among Christians, and some responses have been deeply wary and skeptical. Among these were the statement of the Barnabas Fund⁵ in the United Kingdom and a book entitled *The Truth about A Common Word* coauthored by Sam Solomon and an obscure figure named simply al-Maqdisi.⁶ I will refer to these again below.

The *Common Word* initiative has also led to major Christian-Muslim dialogue gatherings. A conference at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut on July 28-31, 2008 brought together some 70 signatories each of the Yale statement and *A Common Word*.⁷ On October 12-15, 2008, the Archbishop of Canterbury hosted a conference around *A Common Word* in Cambridge, England. Dr. Ali Gomaa, the Grand Mufti of Egypt, was among those in attendance.⁸ In March 2008, the Vatican's

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¹ The English and Arabic pdf texts of *A Common Word* used for this study are found under “Downloads and Translations” (left hand sidebar) at the official *Common Word* website: www.acommonword.com. Citation will be to the English version unless otherwise noted. For the document's authorship, see No. 7, “Frequently Asked Questions,” accessed from the top center of the site home page. For the additional or “new” signatories, see the left hand sidebar. All web pages cited in this article were accessed in March 2009.

² “Loving God and Neighbor Together: A Christian Response to A Common Word Between Us and You,” www.yale.edu/divinity/news/071118_news_nytimes.pdf.

³ “A Common Word for the Common Good” (July 14, 2008), www.acommonword.com/lib/downloads/Common-Good-Canterbury-FINAL-as-sent-14-7-08-1.pdf.

⁴ The statement was dated December 23, 2008 and is available at www.bwanet.org/default.aspx?pid=979.

⁵ Barnabas Fund, “Response to Open Letter and Call from Muslim Religious Leaders to Christian Leaders, 13 October 2007” (November 28, 2007), barnabasfund.org/?a=781&m=7%238.

⁶ Sam Solomon and al-Maqdisi, *The Truth about A Common Word* (n.pl.: Pilcrow Press, 2008), available from pilcrowpress.com/pdf/common_word.pdf.

⁷ See www.yale.edu/divinity/video/commonword/video.shtml for webcasts of the lectures and panels and www.yale.edu/faith/acw/acw-2008-conf.htm for other details of the conference. It was my privilege to attend this event.

⁸ “Communiqué from A Common Word conference” (October 15, 2008), www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/2005?q=a+common+word+conference.

Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue met with *Common Word* representatives and established the Catholic-Muslim Forum.⁹ The Forum's first meeting was held November 4-6, 2008 at the Vatican with some 50 persons participating, including Pope Benedict XVI.¹⁰ In January 2009, the final declarations of these conferences, several official church responses, and other responses and speeches were collected together with *A Common Word* and conveniently published together as a "white paper" on the *Common Word* web site.¹¹

My aim at this juncture in spring 2009 is to step back from this very important process of dialogue and undertake a fresh reading of *A Common Word* to clarify where it has come from and what it is saying, especially in view of the claim that *A Common Word* is helping to nurture an Islamic discourse that is "more positive and open, yet mainstream and orthodox."¹² This quotation from Sohail Nakhoda, editor of *Islamica* magazine and signatory to *A Common Word*, supplies the subtitle to this article, and it constitutes the point of departure for my analysis. The "yet" in Nakhoda's statement suggests that "mainstream and orthodox" sets certain limits on the extent to which *A Common Word* can be "positive and open." I will show that *A Common Word* speaks to Christians in language that they might appreciate but that the traditional doctrine of Islam's inclusive supremacy remains, albeit in a different form that permits a less polemical approach toward Christian doctrines. Before examining these theological features of *A Common Word*, however, I will examine the political argument driving its openness toward Christians.

⁹ "Catholic-Muslim Forum to Further Dialogue," *Zenit* (March 5, 2008), www.zenit.org/article-21979?l=english.

¹⁰ "Final Statement of Catholic-Muslim Forum," *Zenit* (November 6, 2008), www.zenit.org/article-24175?l=english.

¹¹ *A Common Word Between Us and You-White Paper* (Amman, Jordan: The Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2009), www.acommonword.com/downloads/CW-Booklet-Final-v6_8-1-09.pdf.

¹² Sohail Nakhoda, "The Significance of the Amman Message and the Common Word" (December 30, 2008), www.acommonword.com/The-Significance-of-the-Amman-Message-and-the-Common-Word.pdf.

The Political Argument of *A Common Word* and Its Context

A Common Word's political argument is very brief, but it helps to explain why the document appeared at this point in time. Like two bookends holding together its theological arguments, *A Common Word's* political argument appears at the very beginning of the document in its "Summary and Abridgement" and then again at the very end of the body of the document. The opening words of *A Common Word* read, "Muslims and Christians together make up well over half of the world's population. Without peace and justice between these two religious communities, there can be no meaningful peace in the world. The future of the world depends on peace between Muslims and Christians" (p. 2). The end of *A Common Word* observes that Muslims and Christians together "make up more than 55% of the world's population" and that therefore the Christian-Muslim relationship "is the most important factor" for the future of world peace (p. 15). The document continues that neither Christians nor Muslims can decisively defeat each other, and it ups the ante to include our common Christian-Muslim future not only in this world but in the next: "Our common future is at stake. The very survival of the world itself is perhaps at stake....our very eternal souls are also at stake if we fail to sincerely make every effort to make peace and come together in harmony" (p. 16).

To make sense of the apocalyptic urgency expressed by *A Common Word*, we must consider the crises in both contemporary Muslim religious authority and recent Christian-Muslim relations and the attempts of the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute in Jordan to rectify these. Religious authority in the Islamic community has always been contested. It does not differ from other religious communities in this respect. However, the struggle over who speaks for Islam has become especially acute in the modern period as the pace of political, social and technological change has increased rapidly. This crisis in Muslim religious authority was brought painfully to the world's attention by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Suddenly, not only Muslims themselves were asking who speaks for Islam, but non-Muslims in unprecedented numbers were also trying to ascertain what Islam was and whether it posed a threat to their security.

Hostility increased between Muslims and non-Muslims, and this was fueled by, among other things, further terror attacks, the 2003 American-led invasion of Iraq, the Danish cartoon crisis in 2005-2006, and Pope Benedict XVI's comments on Islam in his September 2006 Regensburg address. Paralleling these interfaith tensions were deepening rifts within the Muslim community itself, and these events brought home to many Muslims that all was not well in their own community either.

The Islamic community has no religious authority figure equivalent to the Pope of the Roman Catholic Church. Nor can Muslims appeal to ancient ecumenical councils as do the Orthodox Christian communions. There are, however, Muslim equivalents to Protestantism, especially among Islamists and modernist Muslims. Islamists challenge modern social and political structures by seeking to integrate Islamic principles and practices into all domains of life, while modernists work to show that Islam supports modern political structures and lifestyles. In journalistic parlance the modernists are usually cast as the liberals and the Islamists as conservatives and fundamentalists. In religious argumentation however Islamists and Muslim modernists share a common approach. Both appeal to the authoritative precedence of the Qur'an—or the Qur'an and the Hadith corpus together—over the accumulated tradition of the medieval Islamic jurisprudential schools. This is much as Protestants give precedence to the Bible over Roman Catholic papal authority and the tradition of the church. Among Muslims, this has led to an increasing democratization of religious interpretation and a concomitant dissipation of traditional scholarly authority. Medieval Muslim religious scholars based in seminaries (*madrasas*) enjoyed wide-ranging authority to speak for Islam. Claims that they or their predecessors had come to consensus on matters of Islamic belief and practice were considered authoritative by vast numbers of Muslims. Today, however, such traditionally trained scholars as remain must share a diffuse field of Islamic religious authority with medical doctors, university professors, media pundits, engineers, government officials, political leaders, and radical Islamists like Osama Bin Laden. In response to the post-9/11 urgency felt by many Muslims to

distinguish Islam from terrorism, the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute in Jordan spearheaded a far-reaching consensus building process to reassert the priority of traditionalist scholarly authority. This effort received its doctrinal expression in the 2004 *Amman Message* and “The Three Points of the Amman Message” that followed.¹³

King Abdullah II of Jordan issued *The Amman Message* on November 9, 2004 during the Islamic month of Ramadan.¹⁴ Its aims were to marginalize the voices of both Muslim radicals and non-Muslims who paint Islam as an enemy and to locate the power to define Islam in the hands of knowledgeable and mainstream scholars of religion. Addressed to the whole Muslim community, this declaration decries that Islam is under attack from within and without, and it explains that Jordan is taking up the responsibility to advance a correct vision of Islam. *The Amman Message* then outlines Islamic teachings, condemns terrorism and extremism, and expresses hope that religious scholars can instruct Muslim youth in proper Islamic values and lead the way forward in clarifying and exemplifying true Islam.¹⁵

Following up the declaration, King Abdullah II initiated a process of consultation that led to a July 2005 international gathering of 200 Muslim scholars and leaders who agreed unanimously on a short document called “The Three Points of the Amman Message.” These “Three Points” were also adopted unanimously by a number of other international forums up to and including the meeting of the International Islamic Fiqh Academy in July 2006. In a span of less than two years, more than 500 prominent Muslim scholars and political leaders from a very wide range of Islamic

¹³ The *Amman Message* and related documentation has been collected into book: *The Amman Message* (Jordan: The Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2008), ammanmessage.com/media/Amman-Message-pdf-booklet-v-2-5-2-08.pdf. This will be called “*The Amman Message Book*” to distinguish it from *The Amman Message* itself.

¹⁴ *The Amman Message Book*, v.

¹⁵ *The Amman Message Book*, 3-15.

currents around the world signed or endorsed “The Three Points.”¹⁶ This has been hailed as an Islamic consensus (*ijma'*) unprecedented in its universality and authority, “the first time in over a thousand years that the Ummah [the Islamic nation] has formally and specifically come to such a pluralistic mutual inter-recognition.”¹⁷

“The Three Points of the Amman Message” is a creedal document that seeks to establish Islamic orthodoxy on who is a “Muslim” and who may speak for Islam.¹⁸ The first point precludes the radical Islamist practice of declaring other Muslims apostate in order to justify attacking them, and it casts an unprecedentedly wide net of Islamic legitimacy over practically all who call themselves Muslims. According to the first point, a Muslim is anyone who adheres to the principles of one of the eight long-established Islamic schools of jurisprudence: the four Sunni schools of the Hanafis, Malikis, Shafi'is and Hanbalis, the Ja'fari or Twelver Shi'i school, the Zaydi Shi'i school, and the Ibadi and Zahiri schools. Anyone following one of these eight schools cannot be declared an apostate. The same protection applies to those who adhere to Ash'ari theological doctrine, practice “real” Sufism and follow “true” Salafi thought,¹⁹ as well as to anyone else who confesses the unity of God, the messengership of Muhammad and the five pillars of Islam.

The second of “The Three Points of the Amman Message” is apologetic for the fundamental unity of Islam. It claims simply that much

¹⁶ *The Amman Message Book*, v-vii. Many of these figures were professors in state universities and other non-Islamic educational institutions around the world, as well as diplomats and heads of state (see the list of signatories in *The Amman Message Book*, 23-81). This is not then a consensus of Islamic scholars but wide affirmation that Islamic religious authority should reside in traditionally oriented and trained scholars. This introduces a certain ambivalence into *The Amman Message*, as the initiative seems to have originated primarily from within the Jordanian royal family rather than from scholars trained in traditional modes of jurisprudence themselves.

¹⁷ *The Amman Message Book*, vii.

¹⁸ “The Three Points” are outlined from *The Amman Message Book*, 16-18.

¹⁹ The content of “real” Sufism and “true” Salafi thought is not defined in “The Three Points.”

more unifies the various Muslim schools of jurisprudence than separates them.

The third point narrows the range of authorities entitled to speak for Islam to scholars well trained in the religious tradition. This point specifies that no one may issue religious opinions (*fatwas*) without possessing the requisite qualifications established by one of the aforementioned eight schools of jurisprudence and then following its methodology. In a strong rejection of both Islamism and Islamic modernism, the third point also disallows fully independent *ijtihad* (creative legal reasoning) and the creation of new schools of jurisprudence. A second version of “The Three Points” approved at the 2006 International Islamic Fiqh Academy gathering tones down this traditionalism. It does not censure the emergence of a new school of jurisprudence, and it is less insistent that issuers of *fatwas* must follow one of the eight schools. However, it still stipulates that *fatwa* writers must be appropriately qualified and adhere to established juristic principles.²⁰

The political import of the *Amman Message* process is by now clear. It seeks to concentrate Islamic religious authority in the hands of highly trained scholars of traditionalist orientation and consolidate Islamic identity and unity. This is meant to delegitimize Muslim modernist and Islamist—especially radical Islamist—voices who pronounce on religious matters without reference to the vast tradition of Muslim religious scholarship and threaten to rend the fabric of traditional Islamic faith and identity.

It goes beyond our present purposes to evaluate whether *The Amman Message* process will succeed in its aims. What is significant here is that this effort constitutes the immediate backdrop of *A Common Word*. Originating in the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute and signed by many of the same people involved in *The Amman Message*, *A Common Word* emerged as part of this Jordanian-led movement of Islamic ecumenism and reassertion of traditionalist Islam.

²⁰ *The Amman Message Book*, 21.

The theological robustness and fecundity of the **Amman Message** gave rise to yet another, and no less historic, development—the **Common Word** initiative. The Amman Message already had the seeds of an interfaith message to the world that would be a reflection of the respect that moderate, traditional and orthodox Islam has for other religious traditions.²¹

In telling the story of how *A Common Word* came into being, Nakhooda highlights the leading role played by Jordanian Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad, the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute, and the infrastructure of consensus already in place thanks to *The Amman Message*. Nakhooda credits this infrastructure for making *A Common Word* a new beginning in Christian-Muslim dialogue. He asserts that Muslim-Christian dialogue prior to the *Common Word* was an “ivory tower” endeavor that had failed to impact either the Muslim or the Christian laity. He continues,

²¹ Nakhooda, 6.

22 This document is available from the Egyptian State Information Service:
www.sis.gov.eg/PDF/En/Arts&Culture/072607000000000010001.pdf

At the heart of [A *Common Word*] was the recognition that Muslims and Christians form almost half of humankind and that peaceful relations between them have a positive effect on world peace. Muslims and Christians need to be ambassadors to the noblest ideals of their faith and work together on common grounds to promote the well being of the planet by mobilizing their spiritual, moral and social resources. Global Peace and avoiding a possible “clash of civilisations” are the primary focus of the initiative.²⁴

Both the **Amman Message** and the **Common Word** are helping to institutionalise a more positive and open, yet mainstream and orthodox, discourse that will, God willing, empower our Muslim communities and allow them to engage positively with the world and ease the tensions and

²³ Nakhoda, 8.

²⁴ Nakhooda, 8. The political character of *A Common Word* also comes out at the end of Nakhooda's address where he encourages his audience of Jordanian diplomats to promote *The Amman Message* and *A Common Word* through their diplomatic missions around the world (pp. 12-13).

frustrations that so malign our present condition. Religion has to be part of the solution and not part of the problem.²⁵

As Nakhooda makes clear here, both *The Amman Message* and *A Common Word* are about Muslims finding a mature “mainstream and orthodox” voice that can engage the maelstrom of the contemporary world in “positive and open” discourse and marginalize destructive voices. *The Amman Message* was an attempt to bring internal order to the Muslim community. *A Common Word* was an attempt to speak respectfully to the Christian community and engage it in dialogue toward peace. Nakhooda is clearly delighted with the response that *A Common Word* has engendered from the Christian community, and he hopes that it will lead toward the desired world peace. We now turn to the theological arguments found between the bookends of *A Common Word*’s political argument. It is here that we learn what this “positive and open, yet mainstream and orthodox” religious discourse means in practice.

Love of God and Love of Neighbor in *A Common Word*

A Common Word argues that the foundation for joint Christian and Muslim cooperation already exists in the shared commandments to love God and love the neighbor, as well as in the shared belief in one God. On the basis of this “common word,” the document calls Christians to work with Muslims toward world peace (pp. 2, 14-15). The body of *A Common Word* is divided into three parts that reflect this argument. These three parts are titled 1) “Love of God,” 2) “Love of the Neighbour,” and 3) “Come to a Common Word between Us and You.”

The language of “love” has not played as prominent a role in the religious tradition of Islam as it has in Christianity. It may have come as a surprise to some Christians and some Muslims that they shared the two great commandments and that a Muslim document spoke so much about love. Nonetheless, the Islamic sources do contain a notion of love, and *A Common Word* engages in some resourceful exegesis to draw it out.

²⁵ Nakhooda, 11.

This is immediately apparent in the first section of *A Common Word*, which seeks to link the Prophet Muhammad’s teaching on God’s unity to earlier Jewish and Christian instruction on love of God (pp. 4-8). *A Common Word* first cites the following hadith report from the Prophet: “The best that I have said—myself, and the prophets that came before me—is: ‘There is no god but God, He Alone, He hath no associate, His is the sovereignty and His is the praise and He hath power over all things’” (The Hadith collection of al-Tirmidhi).²⁶ *A Common Word* then interprets each phrase or clause of this hadith after “There is no god but God” to point to aspects of undivided love for God. “He alone” indicates that all devotion must be given only to God. “He hath no associate” means that God must be loved without rivals: “There are men who take rivals unto God: they love them as they should love God. But those of faith are more intense in their love for God” (Q. 2:165). “His is the sovereignty” indicates that the life of the mind should be devoted to God alone. “His is the praise” calls Muslims to thank and praise God for all things. “He hath power over all things” is a reminder that God is omnipotent and should be feared. In the view of *A Common Word*, these affirmations taken all together point to complete love for God. The Prophet Muhammad best exemplified this love, and the Qur’an calls upon Muslims to follow his example, “Say, If ye love God, follow me; God will love you and forgive you your sins. God is Forgiving, Merciful” (Q. 3:31).

A Common Word then cites texts from the Bible indicating the command to love God (Deut. 6:4-5, Matt. 22:34-40, etc.), and it takes particular note of how the Prophet Muhammad’s words at the beginning of the above hadith, “The best that I have said—myself, and the prophets that came before me,” tie back to earlier prophets and their teaching (pp. 8-10). In this light, *A Common Word* suggests, the rest of this hadith, “There is no god but God, He Alone, He hath no associate...,” recalls the Jewish and Christian biblical command to love God. As *A Common Word*

²⁶ In citing the Qur’an and the Hadith, I follow the English translations provided by *A Common Word*. Full references for Hadith citations may be found in the notes to the document.

puts it, "The Prophet Muhammad was *perhaps*, through inspiration, restating and alluding to the Bible's First Commandment. God knows best, but certainly we have seen their effective similarity in meaning (*A Common Word* p. 10, italics mine)." The word "perhaps" here renders this argument tentative and open to further investigation. However, the impulse behind the argument is widespread among Muslims. It is common Islamic conviction that the Prophet Muhammad did not teach anything substantially new in the doctrinal domain. Rather, he simply restored and perfected what earlier prophets such as Moses and Jesus had already brought. A similar argument is made in the third section of *A Common Word*, which I will analyze further below.

Discussion of love of neighbor in *A Common Word* is less extensive. The short second section of the document states that both Islam and Christianity affirm love of neighbor (pp. 11-12). In Islam, *A Common Word* argues, love of neighbor is an essential implication of love for God. The primary Islamic textual support for love of neighbor consists in two traditions from the Prophet: "None of you has faith until you love for your brother what you love for yourself" (The Hadith collection of Bukhari), and "None of you has faith until you love for your neighbour what you love for yourself" (The Hadith collection of Muslim). Also cited are biblical texts such as Leviticus 19:17-18 and Matt. 22:38-40 enjoining love of neighbor.

The third section of *A Common Word* elaborates further in the course of linking the Qur'anic clause, "That none of us shall take others for lords (*arbab*) beside God" (Q. 3:64), to love of neighbor (p. 14). To establish this linkage, *A Common Word* turns first to the eminent Qur'an commentator al-Tabari (d. 923). According to al-Tabari, "That none of us shall take others for lords beside God," means that no one should obey anyone who commands something in contradiction to the command of God. Nor should anyone prostrate themselves to someone in the same way that they prostrate before God. *A Common Word* understands this to mean "that Muslims, Christians and Jews should be free to each follow what God commanded them" and that they should not have to bow down

before rulers (p. 14). *A Common Word* then cites, "Let there be no compulsion in religion..." (Q. 2:256), to support this right to obey and prostrate to God alone. *A Common Word* concludes, "This clearly relates...to love of the neighbour of which justice and freedom of religion are a crucial part" (p. 14), and it quotes Q. 60:8, which enjoins Muslims to deal kindly and justly with those who do not wage war against them due to their religion. While the logic of this argument is perhaps not sufficiently developed, its import is plain. Love of neighbor for *A Common Word* means granting freedom of religion, that is, freedom to obey God's commands unhindered by any competing claims of human rulers and authorities. Christians may find this notion unfamiliar as it wanders far from the story of the Good Samaritan used by Jesus to teach the meaning of neighbor love (Luke 10:25-37). However, it fits well into a traditional Islamic framework where God's absolute dominion and total obedience to God's command are paramount.

As noted above, the language of love is not as prominent in the Islamic tradition as in the Christian. *A Common Word* thus demonstrates extraordinary generosity of intention in speaking in terms that Christians might appreciate, even though the notions of love of God and love of neighbor expressed may be unfamiliar. However, this generous use of love language has also precipitated doubts about its faithfulness to Islamic doctrine, and Prince Ghazi has felt need to provide a defense. The following remarks come from his opening address at the July 2008 Yale Conference. After asserting that *A Common Word* is not about making concessions at the level of convictions, Prince Ghazi states,

Indeed, some have suggested that our framing our extended hand in the language of love is such a concession, but I assure that this is not at all accurate, nor is it a concession. Rather, it has been a particular joy to be able to focus in our initiative on this frequently underestimated aspect of our religion, the principle of love. Indeed, we have over 50 near synonyms for love in the Holy Qur'an. English does not have same linguistic riches and connotations....If Muslims do not usually use the same language of love as Christians in English, it is perhaps because the word 'love'

frequently implies different things for Muslims than it does for Christians. Our use then of the language of love in the *Common Word* is simply a recognition that human beings have the same souls everywhere, however corrupted or pure, and thus that the experience of love must have something in common everywhere, even if the objects of love are different, and even if the ultimate love of God is stronger than all other loves.²⁷

This makes clear that Prince Ghazi and the signatories of *A Common Word* are convinced that in reaching out to Christians by using the language of love they have not departed from orthodox Islamic doctrine. Moreover, there is here clear acknowledgement that Christians and Muslims typically understand love differently and often use different words to express it. However, Prince Ghazi also sees love as a universal human phenomenon that best finds its ultimate fulfillment in God.

The Call of *A Common Word*

While the task of the first two parts of *A Common Word* is to establish that Muslims and Christians share the great commandments to love God and love the neighbor, the third part of the document issues a call to Christians to come together on this foundation to work for peace. *A Common Word* derives this call not only from the pragmatic exigencies of world politics discussed above. It also grounds it theologically. *A Common Word* asserts that God in the Qur'an commands Muslims to direct an invitation (*da'wa*) to religious communities having a book or a scripture, namely Christians and Jews (pp. 2, 13-14). This occurs in Q.3:64, the verse from which *A Common Word* takes its name:

Say: O People of the Scripture! Come to a common word between us and you: that we shall worship none but God, and that we shall ascribe no partner unto Him, and that none of us shall take others for lords beside God. And if they turn away, then say: Bear witness that we are they who have surrendered (unto Him) (Q. 3:64).

²⁷ Transcribed from the web video, "Words of Welcome: Tuesday, July 29," 44:07-45:25 minutes, www.yale.edu/divinity/video/commonword/video.shtml.

Before considering the invitational component of this verse, we will look at the three clauses specifying the content of the "common word". *A Common Word* identifies these with the three foundations shared by Islam and Christianity. The injunction to "ascribe no partner unto Him" indicates God's unity. Worshipping "none but God" implies complete devotion to God and is equivalent to the biblical commandment to love God, and, as just discussed above, "That none of us shall take others for lords (*arbab*) beside God" is linked to love of neighbor (p. 14).

This interpretation of Q. 3:64 shows remarkable openness and charity toward Christians by welcoming them as fellow monotheists and not accusing them of tri-theism. Traditional Muslim interpretations of this verse have been far less generous. For example, the well-known Qur'an commentary of al-Baydawi (d. 1286 or later) interprets "that none of us shall take others for lords beside God" to mean "We do not say that 'Uzayr is the Son of God [an alleged Jewish claim, cf. Q. 9:30], nor that the Messiah is the Son of God. We do not obey the [Jewish and Christian] religious leaders in what they forbid and make lawful without precedent..."²⁸ Another medieval commentator Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 1209) explains that this verse mentions three things—worshipping none but God, not ascribing a partner to God and not taking lords beside God—to counter Christians who associate Christ with God and affirm three eternal and equal essences: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.²⁹ It remains to be seen whether *A Common Word*'s reinterpretation of Q. 3:64 can displace these more traditional readings in Muslim hearts and minds on a wide scale. At the least, it provides a helpful and hopeful start. It also raises the question of what those adhering to *A Common Word* now say

²⁸ *Tafsir al-Baydawi: Anwar al-tanzil wa asrar al-ta'wil* (Beirut: Dar al-kutub al-'ilmiyya, 1408/1988), 1:163-64.

²⁹ Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, *Al-Tafsir al-kabir aw Mafatih al-ghayb*, 3d ed., 33 parts in 17 vols. (Beirut: Dar al-kutub al-'ilmiyya, 2009), 8:76-77. For further discussion of the Qur'an commentary tradition on Q. 3:64 in light of *A Common Word*, see Gordon Nickel, "'A Common Word' in Context: Toward the roots of polemics between Christians and Muslims in Early Islam," forthcoming in *Collectanea Christiana Orientalia* 6 (2009).

about Christian doctrines like the Trinity which Muslims have traditionally rejected. I will return to this below.

We turn now to how *A Common Word* understands the invitation or call (*da'wa*) that Q. 3:64 issues. The Arabic word *da'wa*, here translated "call" or "invitation," is the usual term for Islamic missionary endeavor, and, by employing this term, *A Common Word* locates itself squarely within the framework of Islamic mission. Moreover, this document is by no means the first Muslim letter to Christians based on Qur'an 3:64, and it readily evokes the Prophet Muhammad's encounters with Christians in which it plays a key role.³⁰

Traditional Muslim exegesis of the Qur'an holds that Q. 3:64 was revealed along with the first 80 some verses of Surat Aal 'Imran (Q. 3) when a Christian delegation from Najran in Yemen visited the Prophet Muhammad in Medina.³¹ The Christians affirmed Jesus' divinity at this meeting while Muhammad denied it. Muhammad then invited the Christians to an ordeal of mutual cursing to determine who was right. The call of Qur'an 3:64 was recited as part of the Prophet Muhammad's challenge, which the Christians did not accept.³²

Islamic tradition also tells us that the Prophet sent letters to neighboring rulers inviting them to convert to Islam or face repercussions. Qur'an 3:64 is central in two of these brief letters, one written to the

³⁰ In an instance from the recent past, Q. 3:64 heads the theological section of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's May 2006 letter calling American President George Bush to true monotheism and justice. A translation of this letter may be found at www.lemonde.fr/iran-la-crise-nucleaire/article/2006/05/09/la-lettre-de-mahmoud-ahmadinejad-a-george-w-bush_769886_727571.html.

³¹ For a discussion of the occasion of revelation (*sabab al-nuzul*) for Q. 3:1-80+, see Mahmoud Ayoub, *The Qur'an and Its Interpreters*, Vol. 2 (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), 1-6. According to Ayoub, the twentieth century commentators Tabataba'i and Sayyid Qutb doubt that these verses were revealed for the Najran delegation and suggest alternative possibilities.

³² For the story, see A. Guillaume, trans., *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1955), 270-77 (Q.3:64 quoted on p. 277).

Byzantine emperor Heraclius and another to the Egyptian ruler Muqawkas. Following is the text of the letter to Heraclius as recorded in the Hadith collection of Bukhari:

In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful. From Muhammad, the servant of God and His messenger to Heraclius the great leader of *Rum* [i.e. Byzantium]. Peace be upon whoever follows guidance. To proceed: I call you to Islam. Become a Muslim and you will be safe. God will give you your reward twice over. If you turn away, upon you will be the sin of the *arisiyyin*.³³ "O People of the Scripture! Come to a common word between us and you: that we shall worship none but God, and that we shall ascribe no partner unto Him, and that none of us shall take others for lords beside God. And if they turn away, then say: Bear witness that we are they who are Muslims [i.e. have surrendered (unto Him)] (Q. 3:64).³⁴

A Common Word makes no reference to these initiatives in the Prophet Muhammad's mission, and it does not present itself as an explicit call to change religious allegiance and convert to Islam. However, it is understandable that Christians familiar with these earlier uses of Q. 3:64 and its more traditional interpretations noted above—whether through study of Islamic sources or interaction with Muslims espousing these views—read *A Common Word* as a call to convert. This is for example the way Geoff Tunnicliffe, International Director of the World Evangelical Alliance interprets it:

In your opening summary, you commence with what is obviously a "call to Christians" to become Muslims by worshipping God without ascribing to him a partner. May we, in return, invite you to put your faith in God, who forgives our opposition to him and sin through what his son Jesus

³³ This term has been translated variously as "peasants" or "heretics." See the brief discussion in Nadia Maria El-Cheikh, "Muhammad and Heraclius: A Study in Legitimacy," *Studia Islamica* 89 (1999): 5-21, at p. 11 n. 24.

³⁴ For the story of Heraclius, see Muhammad Muhsin Khan (trans.), *Sahih al-Bukhari: Arabic-English* (Medina: Dar al-fikr, n.d.), 1:7-14 (No. 6, letter on p. 11). The translation is my own with reference to Khan and El-Cheikh.

Christ did for us at the cross? We do this not to stir up strife but because we are as convinced of the truth of our faith as you are.³⁵

Tunncliffe explains further that the Christian and Muslim views of God are very different, and he observes that *A Common Word* quotes only those biblical texts that may be fitted easily into an Islamic framework. For all this, however, he does not receive *A Common Word* as a sign of ill will on the part of the Muslim signatories, and he takes the opportunity to reciprocate the call by inviting Muslims to become Christians.

Other Christians, however, have understood *A Common Word* not merely as a call to convert to Islam but as an attempt to deceive and threaten. This is found in the Barnabas Fund statement and Sam Solomon and al-Maqdisi's book *The Truth about A Common Word* mentioned in my Introduction.

Solomon and al-Maqdisi review traditional material linked to Qur'an 3:64 like that given above and conclude: "The true meaning and ultimate intent of the *Common Word* remains clear: accept Islam or face the consequences."³⁶ These authors observe that Muhammad's letters to neighboring rulers were backed up with the threat of the sword, and they detect a similar threat in *A Common Word*'s political argument which suggests "that the peace of the world is dependent on the Christians' response to their 'common word' invitation."³⁷

Solomon and al-Maqdisi also accuse *A Common Word* of "veiling" the "true" meaning and "the correct Islamic interpretation" of Qur'an 3:64 by not supplying the anti-Christian interpretations found in the Islamic exegetical tradition. This, the authors explain, is permitted by the Islam

³⁵ Geoff Tunncliffe, "We Too Want to Live in Love, Peace, Freedom and Justice: A Response to A Common Word Between Us and You," (World Evangelical Alliance, no date), www.acommonword.com/lib/downloads/We_Too_Want_to_Live_in_Love_Peace_Freedom_and_Justice.pdf. I could not find this document on the World Evangelical Alliance website: www.worldevangelicals.org.

³⁶ Solomon and al-Maqdisi, 18.

³⁷ Solomon and al-Maqdisi, 18.

doctrine of *taqiyya* or "legitimate deception."³⁸ On Solomon and al-Maqdisi's reading, Islam has a fixed essence, and re-interpretation of the faith amounts to nothing more than a ruse. This may be how some Muslims view their religion, but it is hard to see how non-Muslims can render such judgments on either historical or theological grounds.

The Barnabas Fund response to *A Common Word* avoids much of the essentializing discourse of Solomon and al-Maqdisi. It allows that Islam has diverse expressions and can change through time. However, it also maintains that "presenting love for God and neighbor as central to Islam is a misrepresentation of the truth,"³⁹ and it expresses deep concern that Christians—especially western Christians—do not really understand what *A Common Word* means. Like Solomon and al-Maqdisi, the Barnabas Fund statement cites the traditional anti-Christian readings of Qur'an 3:64 and similar texts, and it suggests that *A Common Word* is engaging in *taqiyya* to lull Christians into thinking Islam and Christianity are the same while sending very traditional signals to Muslims:

It appears that the Christian vocabulary of the letter is intended to guide Christian readers to the erroneous conclusion that Islam and Christianity are basically identical religions, focusing on love to God and to the neighbor. The hidden messages for Muslims are contained in the many polemical quotations from the Qur'an.⁴⁰

The ultimate "hidden message" that the Barnabas Fund perceives in *A Common Word* is the call to Islam given by the Prophet Muhammad and the early Muslim community: convert to Islam or at least accept Muslim political dominance.⁴¹

The *Common Word* initiative has rejected these charges. Question 22 in the "Frequently Asked Questions" at the official *Common Word*

³⁸ Solomon and al-Maqdisi, 18.

³⁹ Barnabas Fund, under the last section "Search for common ground..."

⁴⁰ Barnabas Fund, under "Intended Audience."

⁴¹ Barnabas Fund, under "A hidden message for Muslims?"

website denies that it contains a veiled threat: "Is your reference to the danger of world peace a disguised threat? [Reply] No, it is a compassionate plea for peace. Anyone who claims that it is a threat cannot have read the document properly and is attributing motives that are simply not there in reality."⁴² More extensive, however, are the comments of Prince Ghazi in his opening address at the July 2008 Yale Conference. His address situates *A Common Word* squarely in the realm of politics and the need to attain inter-communal peace. At the beginning of his speech, Prince Ghazi clarifies the intention of *A Common Word*: "The intention in sending out the *A Common Word* missive was simply to try to make peace between Muslims and Christians globally. It was and is an extended global handshake of religious good will, friendship, and fellowship, and consequently, of interreligious peace."⁴³

Prince Ghazi goes on to identify Christian-Muslim inter-communal tensions as a serious problem, a problem not confined to the domain of government actors, and he identifies five factors fueling these tensions: "1) Jerusalem and the question of Palestine, 2) discontentment with US foreign policy, especially the war in Iraq, 3) terrorism, 4) fundamentalism on all sides, and 5) missionary activity on all sides."⁴⁴ These factors, Prince Ghazi argues, breed prejudice and suspicion that could lead to atrocities on the order of the Nazi Holocaust and the Rwandan genocide if left unchecked. With the specifically political background of *A Common Word* in view, Prince Ghazi details what *A Common Word* is and is not:

[*A Common Word*] was addressed from religious leaders to religious leaders of the two largest religions in the world in the recognition that,

⁴² "Some Frequently Asked Questions about 'A Common Word,'" acommonword.com/index.php?lang=en&page=faq. An earlier version of this response did not include the last phrase. It read simply, "Is your reference to the danger of world peace a disguised threat? No, it is a compassionate plea for peace. Anyone who claims that it is a threat cannot have read the document properly."

⁴³ "Words of Welcome," 35:16-35:39 minutes.

⁴⁴ "Words of Welcome," 36:51-37:11 minutes.

whilst religious leaders do not generally make public policy, they are nevertheless still the ultimate touchstones for morality and thus the final safety net for public opinion and non-government actors. This is not politics by other means, but rather politics that recognizes that man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that issueth from the mouth of God. It was not intended, as some have misconstrued, to trick Christians or to foist Muslim theology on them or even to convert them to Islam. Neither was it intended...to reduce both our religions to an artificial union based on the two commandments [to love God and neighbor]. Indeed, in Matthew 22:40, Jesus Christ, the Messiah...was quite specific: "On these two commandments *hang* all the law and all the prophets," "hang," not, "are reduced to." It was simply an attempt to find a theologically correct and pre-existing essential common ground, albeit perhaps interpreted differently, between Islam and Christianity, rooted in our sacred texts in their common Abrahamic origin, in order to stop our own deep rooted religious mutual suspicions from being an impediment to all of us behaving properly towards each other....I would like to say also that the *Common Word* does not signal that Muslims are prepared to deviate from or concede one iota, one atom, of their convictions in reaching out to Christians. Nor do I expect the opposite. Let's be crystal clear: the *Common Word* is about equal peace, not capitulation.⁴⁵

Prince Ghazi maintains that *A Common Word* is not a call to Christians to convert to Islam or to Islamicize their theology. Nor does it represent any concession in Muslim belief. It is first and foremost about promoting political civility: shaking hands, mitigating mutual suspicion rooted in religious differences, and "behaving properly towards each other." This very clear statement of peaceful political intention is welcome and significant, and it elaborates the political argument found in *A Common Word* itself in helpful directions.

Nonetheless, Prince Ghazi also makes strong theological claims, even in the course of his irenic remarks quoted above. He speaks of *A Common Word* seeking "to find a theologically correct and pre-existing essential common ground, albeit perhaps interpreted differently, between Islam and

⁴⁵ "Words of Welcome," 40:40-44:07 minutes.

Christianity, rooted in our sacred texts in their common Abrahamic origin". This statement envisions a body of doctrine that goes back to Abraham and is essential to both Christianity and Islam. This "common ground" is not merely fortuitous but ontologically real and one in its essence. *A Common Word* makes a similar claim, and this leads us to consider how the document conceives the relationship between Islam and Christianity more closely.

The Relationship between Islam and Christianity in *A Common Word*

I have already noted above that *A Common Word* suggests that the Prophet Muhammad's statement, "The best that I have said—myself, and the prophets that came before me—is: 'There is no god but God, He Alone, He hath no associate...'," may have originated in the biblical command to love God alone. As *A Common Word* puts it, "The Prophet Muhammad was perhaps, through inspiration, restating and alluding to the Bible's First Commandment" (p. 10). I also observed that this proposal is consistent with the traditional Islamic conviction that Islam does not introduce new doctrines but restates and perfects the doctrines of preceding revealed religions.

A Common Word addresses the theological relationship between the two religions a second time in the third part of the document. *A Common Word* observes that "the Unity of God, love of Him, and love of the neighbour form a common ground upon which Islam and Christianity (and Judaism) are founded" (p. 13). The document then explains that the Prophet Muhammad "brought nothing fundamentally or essentially new," and, after quoting two quranic passages (Q. 41:43, 46:9), it asserts, "God in the Holy Qur'an confirms that the *same eternal truths* of the Unity of God, of the necessity for total love and devotion to God (and thus shunning false gods), and of the necessity for love of fellow human beings (and thus justice), *underlie all true religion*" (p. 13, italics mine).

A Common Word is claiming that Islam restates three eternal truths revealed earlier in Judaism and Christianity and that these "same eternal

truths...underlie all true religion." This claim reflects the widespread and traditional Muslim belief that Islam simply reiterates what preceding revealed religions taught. One may also ask whether *A Common Word* is making the further traditional Muslim claim that Islam recapitulates *everything* that is essential to preceding religions. An open interpretation of "the same eternal truths...underlie all true religion" might envision several different religions—each with its unique set of truths held to be eternal—that coincidentally share three truths in common, namely, God's unity, love of God and love of neighbor. This would allow that Christians hold other truths to be essential or eternal besides the three mentioned here, doctrines such as the triune nature of God that they do not share with Muslims. However, the parallel Arabic wording of *A Common Word* admits of this interpretation even less than the English does. Concerning the eternal truths of God's unity, love of God and love of neighbor that God confirmed in the Qur'an, the Arabic text translates, "The true religion in its entirety (*al-din al-haqq bi-rummatihi*) is based on all of that." Whereas the English speaks of "all true religion," the Arabic speaks of "the true religion in its entirety." This implies that any religion that does not share the same set of eternal or essential truths as "the true religion" is false. *A Common Word* does not identify "the true religion in its entirety" with any particular religion, but one would expect that Muslims presume "the true religion" to be coextensive with Islam or at least with Islam's essence.

Is Christianity then false in the eyes of *A Common Word* insofar as it teaches things that Islam does not? Not necessarily. Much of the Islamic tradition does reject outright as false doctrines such as the Trinity that Christians usually hold to be essential. However, *A Common Word* obliquely suggests another approach. Just prior to making the above argument for what Islam and Christianity hold in common, the document states, "There is no minimising some of their *formal* differences" (p. 13, italics mine). The use of the term "formal" (*shakli*) here instead of "essential" or no adjective at all is significant. This makes readily apparent that *A Common Word* envisages differences between Islam and

Christianity that are *formal*. However, the document gives no evidence of being able to countenance differences between the two religions that are *essential*. On this reading, *A Common Word* need not reject Christian doctrines such as the triune nature of God as wrong. It need only relegate them to the domain of formal or non-essential differences between the two religions and then not speak about them. Aside from formal differences, however, Christianity and Islam are the same in essence, and they share the real common ground of God's unity, love of God and love of neighbor.

This interpretation of *A Common Word* makes sense of why the document does not discuss uniquely Christian doctrines and how it can reinterpret Qur'anic verses traditionally understood in anti-Christian ways much more charitably. If Christian doctrines such as the Trinity, the Incarnation and redemption in Jesus Christ are merely formal, then eternal truth is not at stake, and Muslims find no need to refute them. However, this does not allow that Christianity and Islam could differ at the level of essence, and it also does not offer any real change from the traditional doctrine of Islam's inclusive supremacy, the belief that Islam includes everything true and essential in preceding revealed religions.⁴⁶ The difference is not great between *Common Word* Muslims who hold that the Trinity is not essential to Christianity and more traditional Muslims who reject the Trinity outright as false. Both kinds of Muslims exclude doctrines that most Christians hold to vitally important to their faith from the true essence of Christianity. The inclusive supremacies of both the traditional Islamic and the *Common Word* theologies of religion are thus equally exclusive.

If this interpretation of *A Common Word* is correct, the document constitutes an implicit call for Christians to alter the way they conceive their faith. While *A Common Word* does not call upon Christians to join the Muslim community, it does invite Christians to accept the essential truths of "the true religion" that are found in both Islam and Christianity and then downgrade doctrines such as salvation in Jesus Christ and God's triune nature from the level of essential truths of the faith to the level of differences of form from Islam. In the vision of *A Common Word*, this

would supply the shared theological foundation upon which Christians and Muslims can make peace.

Unfortunately, most Christians will not be able to work together with Muslims on precisely these theological terms and stay true to their faith as they understand it. Speaking of the unity of God, love of God and love of neighbor simply does not affirm everything that Christians want to say in order to express the very core of the Christian faith. Doing that also requires speaking of God's decisive work of redemption in Jesus Christ and all that that implies for the nature of God.⁴⁷ This no doubt explains why the Trinity has emerged as a key theme even among open and appreciative Christian responses to *A Common Word*. Prominent American-based theologians Miroslav Volf and David Burrell gave brief but eloquent explanations of trinitarian doctrine at the July 2008 Yale conference on *A Common Word*.⁴⁸ The Trinity has also featured prominently in a number of official church responses, especially those of the Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams⁴⁹ and Patriarch Alexy II of Moscow and all Russia.⁴⁹

To my knowledge, the metaphysical impasse that I have identified here has not received extended attention in dialogue. Perhaps some would prefer not to broach it because the issue is ultimately irresolvable unless one side alters its views. Yet, it may be good at least to acknowledge that the difficulty exists so that *A Common Word*'s very worthy efforts at improving Christian-Muslim relations and seeking peace in our world do not founder on the shoals of mutual bewilderment. Once the difficulty is acknowledged, the hard work of learning how to negotiate competing Islamic and Christian truth claims equitably and respectfully can continue on more effectively.

⁴⁶ Some Christians would also want to shift the discussion away from the framework of propositional truth within which *A Common Word* works.

⁴⁷ "Conference Panel 1: God is Loving," 1:03-11:43 minutes (Burrell) and 33:14-43:57 minutes (Volf), www.yale.edu/divinity/video/commonword/video.shtml.

⁴⁸ See above Note 3.

⁴⁹ Available at www.acommonword.com/en/a-common-word/6-christian-responses/202-response-from-his-holiness-patriarchy-alexii-of-moscow-and-all-russia.html.

Conclusion

To sum up, *A Common Word* focuses on devotion to God and just treatment of fellow human beings using the language of love of God and love of neighbor familiar to Christians. The document also does not call Christians to convert to Islam, and it avoids traditional Muslim polemics against Christian doctrines. With these features, *A Common Word* has definitely struck a sufficiently positive and open tone to attract the attention of many Christians interested in working with Muslims toward world peace. Prince Ghazi and other *Common Word* signatories have also contributed greatly to the success of their initiative by actively engaging Christian leaders in a number of important dialogues.

Yet, despite its untraditional openness, *A Common Word* retains the inclusive supremacy of Islam, that is, the mainstream and traditionally orthodox doctrine that Islam recapitulates what is essential in preceding religions such as Judaism and Christianity. However, *A Common Word* expresses this doctrine in a non-traditional way. Whereas Muslims have traditionally rejected unique Christian doctrines such as redemption in Jesus Christ and the Trinity as plainly false, *A Common Word* offers the possibility of viewing them as simply formal aspects of Christianity. Such doctrines are not false; they are nonessential. What is essential to both Islam and Christianity in the view of *A Common Word* is God's unity, love of God and love of neighbor. Other doctrines unique to Christianity may be seen as formal or nonessential and so do not require refutation or explicit rejection.

As I have argued above, this theology of religion expressed in *A Common Word* explains its ability to speak generously and un-polemically to Christians without abandoning the inclusive supremacy of Islam. However, it fails to acknowledge that most Christians hold certain doctrines unique to Christianity to be not merely formal but essential to their faith. As it now stands, *A Common Word's* invitation to Christians is predicated on accepting a theological "common ground" that relegates core Christian doctrines to non-essentials. This is something that few Christians can accept. I thus suggest that Muslims and Christians in the

Common Word process would do well to acknowledge these differences together in order to sustain the dialogue. Christians and Muslims would then recognize that essentially different theological presuppositions bring them into relationship with each, even if some of these happily coincide on at least a linguistic level as in the case of God's unity, love of God and love of neighbor. From that point then, rather than from a shared confession of theological essentials, the two communities can work out fair and respectful ways to live in peace.